

After fall shipping in the post-World War II boom, shortgrass country herders grew tired of bragging on calves and lamb weights one winter. Major topic in the hotel lobbies among the Big Boss's cronies became how hard they were working their cowboys.

Mounted on the captains' chairs in the coffee shop, or astride a leather chair arm in the lobby, fantastic roundups led by skilled foremen developed across the white tiles and onto deep pile. Mind not that these gentlemen, removed from the prairie by wartime prosperity and abundant rain, no longer wore boots spur-marked on the heels, or put on hats stained by brown dust to ride to the pasture.

Oh no. Finest leather crafted by Angelo or San Antonio bootmakers shod their feet; beaver felt topped by the soft Italian line shaded their eyes. A block away from the south door of the hotel, a jeweler made sterling buckles for the tooled belts. On the same street, farther south, an immigrant tailor cut the cloth for soft wool jackets to wear over custom-made shirts.

With the debating teams profiled, they moved to the topics of the foremen running the ranches and the hands working under the horses: the "Doc's," the "Bully's," "the Cal's" in a list with "Old Abe," his brother "Lit," and many more good men forgotten in time.

Don't think for a minute the claims of dedication and devotion to working cowboys were exaggerated. How do I know? At the time of the setting of this story, I was on a leave

of absence from the University of Texas at the request of the office of the Dean of Arts and Sciences. Was residing in the north room of the bunkhouse at the Monument Ranch of my family's holdings in Irion County, assigned to the feeding and care of 125 Hereford cows over a pasture of some 5000 acres to be accomplished on horseback at daylight, and before darkness, racing by feed houses filled weekly from a wagon pulled by mules.

Better way to put my plight: I was stranded on a ranch during the festive time of year in disgrace, forgotten, unloved, freckle-faced and redheaded, and so cold and alone at nights that I pulled an old saddle blanket over the end of my cot.

The whole scene made Emperor Napoleon's exile to the Island of Elba look like his majesty's major triumph. (Wish the dean could read that sentence.) But here the story becomes tedious: On Christmas Eve morning, the crew arose an hour early to rush to work. We milked the cows in double speed; left the milk to strain on the cold back porch. Tore off on our horses to make a feed run in the tempo Stanley Frank, the founder of the *Livestock Weekly*, dubbed "the mornings of the fast count." And the best part, we returned to the warmth of the bunkhouse kitchen to find envelopes on the table containing two \$20 bills from the Big Boss.

Returning to the present, fragments of the next 24 or 36 hours spent in town during those holidays come into dim focus. Don't want to indict the living or the dead. Sure

don't want to tarnish myself - a sterling father and grandfather protected by the cover of time.

Here's the way I remember town leave to Angelo the Christmas of 1947. Was it me or one of my pals who took a lovely young girl to a party in a white-pillared brick mansion decorated to the third floor in silver Christmas lights?

To the left of a formal entrance hall, two sterling bowls held crystal liners filled with English gin and French champagne punch and rested on an inlaid mahogany table polished to a high sheen to reflect the stemmed glassware.

The lovely girl and her escort, conscious of proper appreciation of hospitality, drank the punch in draughts as if this potent introduction to San Angelo society were flagons of near beer. (Two scoundrels going to Washington Lee in Virginia brought the recipe to town.)

Such social exertion required a long time to drive from the party to the girl's house. So long that she was three hours past curfew arriving home. But the important part is to come. Her mother kept her up until daylight reading scripture, each cramped line filled in tinted print.

Man and coyote, even left apart on the prairie, share a strong sense of danger. I can't swear I was the escort, nor can I deny it. But I can sure remember tearing back to the ranch the next day as hard as my old car ran, to the safety of the east side of the Santa Fe Railroad. Don't need to add, but will, that I stayed at the ranch until the Dean's sentence was lifted, content to live in solitude.